

Kelsey (C.) *Comp'd*
Chas Kelsey

FUNCTIONAL HEART TROUBLES.

(A Paper read before the New York Clinical Society, at the Annual Meeting,
April 25, 1879.)

BY

CHARLES KELSEY, M. D.

(Reprinted from THE HOSPITAL GAZETTE, May 31, 1879.)



FUNCTIONAL HEART TROUBLES.

(A Paper read before the New York Clinical Society, at the Annual Meeting,
April 25, 1879.)

BY

CHARLES KELSEY, M. D.

(Reprinted from THE HOSPITAL GAZETTE, May 31, 1879.)



THE TOWNSHIP OF ...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

FUNCTIONAL HEART TROUBLES.

(A Paper read before the New York Clinical Society, at the Annual Meeting, April 25, 1870.)

BY

CHARLES KELSEY, M.D.

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen:

In looking over my case-book I have been struck with the similarity in some of the essential features of the following cases which have been under my care within a short time of each other, and it has occurred to me that possibly by grouping them into a connected narrative certain general rules as to the treatment of a not uncommon and I believe increasing trouble might be deduced.

They are variously headed—some simply as nervousness, some as spinal irritation, and some as functional derangement of the heart, but I will try and relate them to you in a way not so minute as to be tiresome or as to conceal their general similarity, and we can name them afterwards, if necessary.

CASE I.—A young professional man, aged 24, unmarried, and of nervous organization, had always been strong and well up to a few months before the time of his coming under observation, and had rather flattered himself on the amount of work, mental and physical, which he was able to do. Had lived plainly, and was given to no excesses. For a year back, however, he had taken to smoking and, like most men of his stamp, had at once carried it to excess, reaching fifteen or twenty cigars a day, with innumerable cigarettes between. Added to this, he had been working very hard, sleeping irregularly and not enough, and spurring himself on with coffee late at night. It is not surprising that trouble came, but the manner of its coming was peculiar, for without any warning sufficient to attract his attention, he was seized suddenly one morning, after a partial night's rest, while on his way upstairs, with a violent commotion about the heart and a sense of utter prostration and weakness, which compelled him to lean against the wall for support, and slowly make his way back to his bed.

Physical examination failed to show any sign of organic disease and the treatment was plain enough, and in a good degree he followed it. But the heart for many months did not recover its former strength, and any unusual physical strain or sudden emotion would start it into irregular action, though otherwise he was entirely well. Now it is only on great provocation that he is conscious of any trouble; but still the tendency is there, and a little too much smoking, or irregular living, will remind him, as he says, that his heart is his weak point.

CASE II.—Lady, age 21, single, a person of strong will and mental power, and not at all subject to the usual influences of city life, which

are supposed to cause so many of the troubles of fashionable people. For a year back has suffered more or less from coldness of the extremities, shortness of breath, palpitation of the heart, sleeplessness and loss of appetite and flesh, and has been under the care of the family physician for what he finally rashly called "nervousness;" an insinuation, as she considered it, against her strength of mind and will, which put to flight all her confidence in his skill as a diagnostician.

These premonitions finally culminated in a fainting fit while at table, and from that moment she rapidly passed from bad to worse. Utter sleeplessness, great disturbance of the heart action, complete loss of appetite, emaciation, prostration and delirium followed each other in rapid succession until the condition became truly alarming. I wish I could picture it to you as it is pictured on my own memory. The nights were spent in sleepless quiet, only broken by her occasional starting up in bed in terror at the slightest noise in the house or street, or even a movement of a heavy body in the next house. During the greater part of the day she lay quietly in bed, too weak to sit up without faintness or to enjoy any efforts made for her amusement; the dreary monotony only broken by the almost futile attempts at regular intervals to induce her to take a little nourishment.

Later in the afternoon there came a change, and she declared herself as feeling better and would be helped to a neighboring sofa for a rest, where she would lie, talking and cheerful, the excitement of her voice and manner gradually increasing until suddenly, with a merry laugh, she lapsed into a fit of hysterical delirium. While this lasted she was again put to bed and gradually became quiet, and another sleepless night began. For days this unvarying programme was repeated.

The action of the heart was peculiar, showing itself on the slightest muscular exertion or mental excitement—at first by a slight quickening of the respiration, which gradually but steadily became more and more rapid, until after two or three minutes there came a long-drawn, gasping sob, and the patient sank away into partial unconsciousness, attended with slight spasm of the hands and a change from the full bounding beats of the pulse to an irregular flutter. After a minute or two the unconsciousness passed away, and she was once more herself, only very weak and exhausted. These attacks were repeated more or less frequently, sometimes half a dozen times in the day and night, and though gradually growing less frequent as her health improved, were among the last of the symptoms to disappear. Another point about them was that they could be produced at any moment by giving the smallest quantity of stimulant—even the alcohol contained in a twenty drop dose of a tincture—and constituted an insuperable obstacle to this line of treatment. I distinctly remember the intense excitement caused by a wine-glassful of English ale, and this is the only case in which I have ever seen the delirium of chloral caused by a single dose of twenty grains, and stopped by another of the same amount, which produced sleep.

For six weeks, as near as I could discover, she scarcely slept two hours in succession, and often was not asleep for forty-eight, the time when she ought to have slept being passed in a state of perfect physical quiet and exhaustion and great mental activity; as she expressed it, "all asleep except her thoughts." I never, by the most careful examination, could make out any physical cause for the nervous irritation from which she suffered, and there certainly was no organic disease.

Suffice it to say that the case was a very long one, resisting all of the usual medicinal remedies for nervous exhaustion, which, indeed, I finally abandoned as doing more harm than good; and only yielding to time, rest, and change.

CASE III.—A strong, vigorous man, aged forty-three, of active business habits; married and accustomed to the use of tobacco and liquor in moderation, but given to no excesses; had always been well until about a year before coming under my care, but during this time had been much absorbed in business and almost constantly in a hurry. Accustomed to having his body answer readily to any calls he made upon it, he never spared himself. He traveled much, and if a train went before breakfast, that was the train for him; or if a horse-car passed the corner while he was in the middle of the block, that, and by no means the next one, was his car. Eating irregularly, sleeping when convenient, and smoking vigorously, he went on for nearly a year, suffering only from occasional severe headache and derangement of the heart action, with dyspepsia, but not particularly troubled about himself. Then came the collapse; and while sitting quietly at his desk one morning, anticipating no evil, he was suddenly smitten with unconsciousness, feeling "as though the heavens and earth were coming together and he was between them." Those who were near him noticed the deathly pallor of his countenance. After two or three hours of semi-unconsciousness, he recovered sufficiently to start for his home, in the country, but had another similar attack on the way. From this time for nearly a month he could give but an uncertain account of his own condition: knows he was out of his head part of the time, and traveled around some, and was brought home. He had occasional attacks of dizziness, lasting a few moments. His mental condition had improved so that he was able to resume his business, but suffered from severe basilar headache, sleeplessness, and great irregularity in the action of the heart, with a constant foreboding of evil. At this time he came into my hands. Physical examination revealed nothing, and it was almost impossible to make him believe that such a train of symptoms could have come from so slight a thing as having worked too hard; but a few weeks of proper living convinced him that he was on the road to recovery, and now his own account of the exact regularity of his daily habits is very amusing. There is nothing in business so important that it cannot wait for his meals, and trains before breakfast no longer interest him. He takes time to sleep and time to rest, and is as well as he could desire.

CASE IV.—A gentleman in middle life, an Englishman, and the head of a large manufacturing business. For several years, according to his own statement, has been doing the work of three men, and has finally broken down and is threatened by his physicians with softening of the brain. He has therefore given up his business entirely, and after spending six months on a yacht in the Mediterranean where he could rest, has come to America for the same purpose, bringing his doctor with him, who scarcely leaves him for a moment, and whom he consults as to the propriety of all the minutiae of his daily life, from the time of his rising in the morning till his retiring at night. I first met him socially, in a company of ladies and gentlemen who were told that he was a great invalid and must not be disturbed by any noise or excitement; and was struck with the air of longing with which he listened to the music of a piano for a few moments, and occasionally joined in the conversation. But he soon found the excitement too much for him and went to his room, "to be quiet," inviting me to go with him. I went, and after producing a cigar for me but abstaining himself, on the plea that he was "afraid for his head," he gave me the history of his case—as plain a history of functional heart trouble and as devoid of any symptoms pointing to his brain as could well be imagined. When I humbly ventured to tell him so he sat for a long time in silent thought and finally broke out with "By George, I believe you are right! I always told them my trouble was in my chest, but they were determined I should have softening of the brain, and I supposed they must be right," and then he seemed a little afraid lest even this outburst of excitement, the first apparently, which he had allowed himself for a long time, might bring on the dreaded disease, which was never out of his mind.

The next morning he eluded his physician long enough to have a consultation with Dr. Clark, and soon after dispensed with him altogether. A few weeks spent in travel and relief from the spectre which had haunted him so long, and he was once more at the head of his business, doing one man's work instead of three, he wrote me, but doing it well, and never in better health in his life.

CASE V.—A man, aged thirty-eight, married; filling an important public position, and given to no bad habits. Is far removed from what would ordinarily be considered a man of nervous temperament, and would at first strike one as exactly of the opposite type; weighing nearly two hundred, a good liver, and having a calm, contented air; as though he were in the habit of taking life easily, but in reality not so.

For some time past has not been well, suffering from certain nervous attacks, which he himself describes very accurately. The one which he related to me on his first visit, will serve as a type of nearly all of them.

While sitting quietly in his room one Sunday morning feeling as well as usual, he was roused by the noise made by his little girl, who had been shut into her room for some trifling misbehavior, and

had begun a bombardment of the door with her feet. Rising, he stepped to the room to tell her the noise must cease, and in the act felt a sudden stoppage of the heart, a catching for breath, and a sense of impending danger, which lasted a few moments and left him weak, troubled and nervous. Complains of many such attacks; has them during the day when a messenger approaches him suddenly with a letter; or in the night while sleeping quietly will be awakened by a profuse perspiration and the violent action of his heart beating against his chest. Often feels his pulse at such times, and finds it regular but full and strong. At such times cannot free himself from a sense of foreboding and imminent danger, and is much troubled by the thought that he may be about to break down and be compelled to give up his business, if nothing worse.

The case was puzzling, not so much from its nature, which was plain enough, but from its causation, which was by no means easy to discover, with every facility offered me by the patient.

Had the man been an excessive smoker it would have been plain, but he never smoked. Had he been a man of different build and irregular in his habits I should have thought I knew where to begin treatment, but he seemed to live regularly enough, and did at least as well as he knew for he was very anxious to be well, nor did he profess himself troubled in business matters, and was not overworked, and seemed a man not to worry unnecessarily. He took a fair amount of outdoor exercise, at least as much as many men who are well, and as I often told him he *ought to be well* if he was not. He had tried many doctors, and had taken much medicine, but had been nearest well while at Vichy and at this point treatment was begun—to try and reproduce Vichy in New York Alkaline waters, great regularity in all his daily habits, and regulated out of door exercise was the commencement, and finally by his aid I was enabled to do what I much desired, see him in one of the attacks, while he lay on his bed prostrated, his heart beating like a trip hammer, his body covered with perspiration, and his limbs occasionally twitching spasmodically. This one had been caused plainly enough by a day of great business excitement and worry.

Later he had another severe one caused by drinking several cups of cold tea for lunch on a hot Summer day, and then driving out. His horses became a little unmanageable; he had an exciting pull with them; stopped on his way home, and drank another cup of cold tea, and then ended the day with a similar attack.

After that the causation was plain enough and once being found the remedy was not far to seek, and by careful attention to minute details he soon began to mend.

CASE VI.—A lady, delicate, married and at the change of life, for sometime back has been in rather unusual good health for her, but was taken down suddenly and without apparent cause. Weakness, prostration, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and violent action of the heart. Pulse rapid but regular, for days at a time marking a hundred and ten or twenty and without any corresponding rise in temperature.

Often had fainting fits on the least exertion, such as sitting up in bed, and though never actually losing consciousness at such times, had a feeling of apprehension and approaching dissolution very hard to overcome. Was troubled with slight cough, and pain on swallowing, and stomach irritation, but a careful examination by Dr. Leaming failed to discover any disease of the chest.

In spite of treatment sank steadily from worse to worse for a certain length of time with increase in the severity of all the symptoms and then slowly began to mend, and to gain in flesh and strength till she was well.

The attack was probably caused by the shock to a weak nervous system, of the sight of the sudden death of an old servant by hemorrhage.

CASE VII.—Lady, age 32, single.—When first seen was in a state of complete nervous exhaustion, trembling, hysterical, and in great excitement. Had been suffering for nearly two years with symptoms of nervous prostration, the least exertion or excitement started her heart into painful activity, she slept poorly, had no appetite, had become very thin and weak, was sure she had womb trouble, and had about given up hope of ever being well.

An attempt at physical examination was abandoned on account of her extreme weakness and excitement, the slightest touch of the hand upon her abdomen causing a convulsive shuddering which was uncontrollable. No uterine or ovarian trouble could be made out, in fact she had already been examined by Dr. Thomas without any being found, and the patient was placed flat on her back and kept there for two months.

The conditions were exceptionally favorable for this treatment, it being Summer and the house deserted except by herself and the servants; and she was systematically fed, rubbed and galvanized back into health on the plan of Weir Mitchell, being an entirely different person by the time her friends returned in the Fall.

We have here a group of cases—for I believe they may with propriety be grouped in one category, notwithstanding their differences—in all of which there is one prominent symptom, an over-action of the heart without organic disease. Four of them are males, and three of them females; and in all of them the disturbance of the heart was amongst the first of the symptoms, in some of them the only one, attracting attention, and not the result of a previous weakly and nervous condition. In all of them I think it may be spoken of as the focus of the malady, the thing causing the most discomfort, and hence I have come to consider them as cases of functional heart trouble, and to speak of them as such, though recognizing them under all their various titles of nervousness, nervous exhaustion and spinal irritation.

It is what Richardson may with propriety, perhaps, call a disease of modern life, and perhaps also peculiarly of American life, for they tell me the trouble is by no means common on the other side of the water; and the case of the gentleman with the threatened

softening of the brain would seem to prove as much, for he certainly had good medical care, if not the best, both in England and on the Continent.

It may have its birth in our peculiar American mode of life, our hurry and worry, and unsparing zeal in the strife for wealth and position, and is closely allied to another trouble which first manifests itself in a failure of the brain-power. Indeed they may be combined as in Case III., but I do not know that the one has any tendency to merge into the other. They generally are distinct from the first and remain so. If the heart bears the burden of the strain so much the better for the patient, for his brain will probably escape.

I would especially call attention to the suddenness with which, in some of these cases, the affection manifested itself, the patient dropping at once from a state of comparative health to one of complete prostration.

That there were warnings of approaching trouble which might have caught the eye of a physician I have no doubt, but the fact that they were not sufficient to induce the patients to seek medical aid shows how slight they must have been.

Perhaps the most troublesome of all the symptoms is the ever-present foreboding of evil, the sense of approaching calamity, which cannot be reasoned away. I have found it useless to explain to these sufferers the difference between organic disease and functional derangement. I have never done more than make them believe that I saw no danger, but in their minds the fear will remain. There is but one way to overcome it and that is to cure the complaint. As the attacks grow less frequent and the patient gains more confidence in himself the dread will wear away, and not till then; but to make them understand that so much trouble may come from an affection not at all grave in itself is generally impossible. And now a few words as to treatment. I know of no affection in which the uselessness of trusting to drugs is more strongly marked. A physician may run through the whole range of tonics, nervines, and anodynes, and see the patient steadily grow worse under his hands. I have sometimes thought that in women the disease has a certain course to run, at first from bad to worse, till a certain point of prostration was reached, to be followed by a very slow and gradual improvement; and I have never been convinced of the power to arrest it in its downward course, though after the lowest point is reached recovery may certainly be hastened. The danger is, lest in desperation, medicines be unduly multiplied, for it does seem as though tonics ought to give them strength and anodynes bring sleep, but they sometimes will not. Personally I have learned much of the art of not giving medicines from these causes.

The treatment must be more radical than this and simpler.

There are certain classes of people to whom these troubles do not come. A farmer in the fields or a woman leading the simple healthy life of a country village will live and die and never wake to the unpleasant consciousness of having such a thing as a heart or a

nervous system, and to these we must look for our models. So that when a man comes to me now complaining that his heart is out of order, and after a certain amount of questioning I find that he has been speculating in Wall street, or sitting up late and eating and drinking irregularly, or has been worried in his business and overworking himself; I involuntarily run over in my own mind some of the differences between him and the life he leads and his malady, and the man who in his rugged, simple, out of door life never thinks of his heart, or has occasion to; and when a radical blow has been struck at these differences a step has been made towards a cure.

It is useless to try and prop a man up in this mode of life, or to strengthen and calm a nervous system suffering from this strain while the strain continues. Better strike at once at the mode of life itself as the cause of the malady. Of course this is the most difficult kind of treatment, for these men will one and all say, I cannot give up my business nor can I change my mode of living, and what they want is some convenient medicine which will enable them to go on in the same way. But a distinction must be drawn between business and worry, between work and care, for it is the care and worry which do the evil and not generally the work, and in most cases the man will be the better for a certain amount of legitimate work if it can be separated from the things which worry him.

Speculation, risk, the casting of fortune on a single turn of the market, the venturing of all on a single chance is what wears out these men—and this is not business. If it is, then business must be given up. And when I am asked if this is necessary, if a man must rest, as these men understand rest, the abandoning of all occupation and going away, I take these things into consideration in the answer.

After that the cure will lie in simple habits of life, proper attention to all the details which make up the sum total of health, and not much in drugs. There is no rule which will cover any two cases—each must be cured by itself; but it is worth remembering that with a heart which has once begun this spasmodic action after a time a sort of habit is acquired, and a little thing which would not cause a flutter in a healthy man may be enough to start it in its disagreeable palpitations. A glass of wine, a cup of coffee or tea, a late dinner, or a little too much tobacco, things which would escape notice, are enough to do the damage.

In women the treatment is even more difficult, and before one of these cases a doctor may well stand aghast, unless he is prepared in a way which (until justified by the results) may seem ruthless, to make an entire change in the mode of life. For these are the women who are always "miserable" and never "strong," who spend their substance on one doctor after another and finally settle down upon some favorite water-cure where they receive more or less benefit, and in which they pass a part of each year. But they seldom receive any radical treatment, and their lives never approach in daily routine the lives of the women who are *not* miserable and *are* strong.

The problem is simple—given a human organism which is function-

ally out of order, how soonest and best to set it to running properly. It must be controlled absolutely; it must be as clay in the hands of the potter to be moulded into health.

We have certain plain facts to guide us. We know, for instance, that a person cannot be well without a certain amount of nourishment, therefore see that the nourishment is taken. The same with exercise or rest as may be indicated, and with all the minutiae of every-day life. If this can be done, there can be but one result—health.

But I know of no task more arduous and unsatisfactory than to attempt to carry out any such line of treatment in a patient's own house, and surrounded by her friends and relatives, where each step is watched and explained and criticised, and sure to be followed by the ever-recurring question, "How do you feel *now*?"

At every step we are met with objections; we are told by the patients that they cannot eat, and cannot walk, and cannot sleep without their anodynes, and to all of this we have to oppose not argument and persuasion, but *ourselves* and our authority, based on our knowledge of what can be done. It is perhaps the *man* who cures as much as his remedies, and it requires only a little experience to appreciate the value of Weir Mitchell's plan of taking these patients out of their own homes and separating them from their friends, placing them where his control is absolute. They can be cured without it, but how much more easily where the struggle is between the doctor and the patient alone. The treatment need not be harsh; there is no indication for harshness. Take it for granted that she is to be cured, and set about it in the easiest way for herself and yourself. It will require a good deal of strength of will and no little knowledge to oppose the evil strait into which she has fallen, and the habits of a life-time which have brought her to it, but it must be done, and when once begun the task is half accomplished. There are scarcely any other cases in which the confidence required is greater, or the control needs to be more absolute.

48 East 30th Street, New York, June 10, 1879.

